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ABSTRACT

Paragraph analysis of college textbooks is concerned with the ability of the student to discover (1) the main idea of the paragraph and (2) what the rest of the paragraph does. A method for teaching students to find main ideas and understand paragraph relationships is presented. Seven major types of thought relationships (example, explanation, cause-effect, comparison-contrast, conclusion, definition, and reiteration) are used. References are included. (DE)

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PARAGRAPH ANALYSIS

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There are two major areas of paragraph analysis in which the student must be competent if he is to do an effective job of understanding his college textbooks. First, he must understand how to find the overall idea, the key point, the MAIN IDEA of the paragraph. He must have a feeling for and a sensitivity to the "gestalt", the idea of the whole paragraph. Second, he must understand what the rest of the paragraph does. Once an author states his main idea, why is the rest of the paragraph necessary? The student must understand the relationship of (1) the main idea to the supporting details, and (2) the supporting details to each other. Let us examine these two areas of paragraph analysis one at a time.

Finding Main Ideas

One key problem in teaching paragraph analysis is that too often the student is merely exposed to paragraphs and is then asked to find their main ideas. Most often the paragraphs are presented in order of increasing difficulty (as determined by the subjective judgment of the teachers). If the student finds the correct main ideas he is presumed to be proficient in this skill. If he is unable to find the key thoughts for many of the paragraphs he is given the correct answers and is then asked to try additional "easier" paragraphs and he must continue to do this until he either makes the correct responses or is too frustrated to do so and gives up, at which time we say that he is a slow learner or even a non-learner.

Unfortunately, at no time is the student given specific instruction in how to find main ideas in paragraphs. He must by some magical inferential process come up with the right answers. Even when he makes errors, he is not told what to do to correct them. The point is this: In order for students to successfully learn the skill of finding main ideas in paragraphs he must be taught a specific method - a formula - that is easy to understand and easy to apply. This must be carefully illustrated with many examples. He must then be given opportunity to practice on his own -- with all errors analyzed in terms of the method originally presented. Samples used should be increasingly complex and should be chosen (as soon as possible) from textbook material. Finally, the student should practice with materials in his own textbooks. In all cases errors should be analyzed in terms of the original formula.

An illustration would be appropriate here. One specific method for finding the main idea of a paragraph is as follows:

Ask two questions about the paragraph.

1. Who or what is the paragraph about.
2. What does the author really want you to understand about the "who or what".

Begin the answer to the second question with the answer to the first question.

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After presenting the method, a clear sample paragraph should be used to help the students understand how this formula can be applied. If necessary, two, three, or even four sample paragraphs should be used. It is most important to realize that if a student is unable to understand the application of this formula to simple paragraphs with the help of the instructor he will never be able to apply them to more difficult paragraphs on his own. Too often students are presented with the method and then left on their own. As a result, these students fail to become proficient in this most important skill.

The next step should be to allow students to find the main ideas of many paragraphs selected by the instructor. Whenever a main idea is missed or misunderstood, the paragraph in question should be analyzed thoroughly in terms of the formula presented. After that, students can practice finding key thoughts of paragraphs in textbooks used by them.

Somewhere along the line during the instructional periods it should be made clear that in finding key thoughts, the reader must pay attention to the intent of the author rather than to the words he uses. Although a literal interpretation of words often expresses the intent of the author, sometimes it doesn't. The good reader must be sensitive to this. An inflection of the voice or stress on a particular word will give away a speaker's intent. The reader, however, has only the printed page. When the sentence on the page says, "I'm glad you arrived on time, Joe," an unwary reader may assume that the speaker is really happy about the fact that Joe was prompt in arrival. If he had read the paragraph carefully, however, and had realized that the speaker had been waiting on a cold street for Joe for forty-five minutes, he would have been able to observe the sarcasm in the comment, "I'm glad you arrived on time, Joe."

Understanding Paragraph Relationships

Once the student is successful at finding main ideas his attention should be directed to the rest of the paragraph. If the main idea expresses the point of the paragraph, why is the rest of the paragraph necessary? How does the rest of the paragraph relate to the main idea? How do the sentences in the paragraph relate to each other? Once again, factual information and a method for discovering paragraph relationships must be presented. One way of doing this is to list the major types of paragraph relationships and then tell how they may be recognized. This should then be followed by a model, a clear easily understood example. After that, many practice exercises should be done under supervision with errors analyzed in terms of the formula given. For example, seven major types of thought relationships are example, explanation, cause-effect, comparison-contrast, conclusion, definition, and reiteration.

These seven types of paragraph relationships should be presented one at a time. In each case they should be clearly illustrated with a model paragraph. Following this, the student should be carefully lead into more complex illustrations of the use of the particular relationship, eventually allowing him to discover it in his own textbooks. Considerable practice is necessary if the student is to develop proficiency and sensitivity in this skill. Many different kinds of practice exercises can strengthen skill. Some of these are as follows:

1. Read the paragraph and discover how each sentence relates to the main idea.
2. Read the paragraph and discover how the sentences in it relate to each other.
3. Read the paragraph. Then make up sentences which relate by example, explanation, cause-effect, comparison-contrast, comclusion, definition, or reiteration.

It should be noted that all during these lessons students are forced to consider thoughts and thought relationships. Students are learning to read ideas rather than words. Thus, even when they have difficulty seeing paragraph relationships, they are still learning to read ideas. This is a most important "extra" that is learned (almost as an aside). This is true even when attention is given to guide words as a clue to recognizing paragraph relationships. However, when discussing this with students it is important to point out that even here, the author's intent must be understood.

What about these guide words. A good reader must understand that certain words or phrases (or even certain punctuation) signals a thought relationship. Some of them follow.

Example: for example, for instance.
Explanation: this is so because, the reason for this is.
Cause-effect: as a result, because of this.
Comparison-contrast: on the other hand, in contrast.
Definition: by -- we mean, being -- refers to.
Reiteration: in other words, what I mean to say is.

This is brought home forcefully to students if the teacher uses a sentence completion technique, having students complete the sentence following the guide words, and then pointing out how, no matter what the student says, it will illustrate the particular type of paragraph relationship.

To illustrate this, if the following were presented to the student:

John likes all kinds of sports. <u>For example</u>. . .

and if the student were asked to complete the second sentence, he would readily see that he must follow with a particular example of one kind of sport that John likes (if this sentence is to be logical). Then some can be done for any of the guide words. Look at the following example:

John likes all kinds of sports. <u>On the other hand</u>. . .

Once again, the logical pattern of thought development demands a contrast here. So it is with the other guide words.

Teachers might also ask students to recognize guide words in paragraphs that they read (always be sure that the student understands that the thought following the guide word(s) really relates in the way that the guide word suggests that it does). Students might also compose their own sentences using the guide words to introduce the type of relationship used.

Another way to interrelate skills -- students should be taught to see how recognizing the guide words helps him to improve reading rate and flexibility. When he sees the words, "for example", he should recognize that an example of the preceding thought will follow. If he understood the thought, then he should read the example at full speed (just to be sure that he really did understand the thought). If he didn't fully understand the example, or if he is not sure, the guide words should tell him to adjust his speed downwards in order to achieve better comprehension.

Although the teaching of paragraph analysis is a difficult task indeed, the teacher should not shun it. Nor should he treat it lightly. Nor should he just expose students to it, telling them about it, lecturing without really <u>teaching</u> this most important skill.

Skill in paragraph analysis is a prerequisite for success in other reading skills. It is necessary if one is to read ideas, rather than words; it helps concentration and memory; it improves reading rate and comprehension; and is a must for successfully applying any of the formulae for studying (PQ3R, SQ3R, PQRST, etc.).

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